

SCHUYLKILL MEETING.

[Read by Sarah Coates Pennypacker at the time of the October 3, 1909 pilgrimage to Schuylkill Meeting House near Phoenixville, Pa.]

In a historical sketch of this meeting, it may be well to refer slightly to the conditions, geographical and otherwise, which preceded and accompanied its inception. This locality at that time was part of Charlestown Township. The public road on the west was known as the Long Ford road, and led from the fertile farms of Chester Valley, an earlier settlement, to the Schuylkill River, the great waterway of the country, and in the spring of added importance because of its shad fisheries. That on the southward line was laid mainly through the activity of Samuel Nutt, for whom it was named, who manufactured iron at Coventry Forge.

One hundred years ago, and earlier, the evidences would indicate that, religiously, the people of this locality were either Friends or Mennonites.

At present there is no building for religious purposes in this neighborhood which antedates this house. The humble structure which stood near the corner of what is now known as Main Street and Nutts Avenue and which lives in the memories of some present as Morgan's Schoolhouse, was built, according to the "Annals of Phoenixville," in 1772 by the Mennonites for religious and educational purposes. From the same authority we find that another house reared by the same sect, in 1794, was on land which afterwards became the southwest corner of Main and Church Streets, Phoenixville. It is to be regretted that that neat, substantial, well-proportioned house, indicative of the earnestness, simplicity and sincerity of its builders, was not allowed to remain as one of the landmarks in the history of the locality.

There must have been a populous Quaker community here, to whom reference is made in the minutes of the Valley Preparative meeting as "our members in Charlestown." We know that identified with the neighborhood were the Coates Longstreth, Robinson, Roberts, Jacobs, Maris, Eldridge, Fussell and Walker families.

In Montgomery County, not three miles away, in an air line, but with the Schuylkill between, was Providence Friends' Meeting. Six miles westward in "John Pike's land" another meeting was found belonging to Caln Quarter. Southeastward, over the hills and five miles away, the Valley Friends had their meeting, and with them the majority of the Friends in this neighborhood seem to have affiliated.

Then no State highway made travelling easy; no boulevards traversed the hills. Some of us can remember when there were no township pike roads and have a realizing sense of the depth of mud possible in public highways at certain seasons. Doubtless the Charlestown Friends found frequent "attendance at Meetings for Worship and Discipline" both laborious and difficult and hence desired an authorized and permanent meeting in their midst.

Enoch Walker then owned and resided at Moore Hall. His holdings included this land. In 1807 he built this part of this house for public purposes as defined in a document which shall be later more fully set forth. Here appointed meetings were held for travelling Friends and here Benjamin Moore had a school.

The first official recognition of the independent movement in this neighborhood, is found in the year 1812.

Of the caution and deliberation which characterize the methods of Friends in their business meetings, perhaps no better example can be found than that furnished by the minutes of Radnor Monthly Meeting in relation to the founding of this meeting.

On the 13th day of Second month, 1812, Radnor Monthly Meeting records the following minute: "The Valley Preparative inform that they have united in a belief that the time had arrived that our members in Charlestown might be indulged with a Meeting for Worship, to be held at their School-house in that place on the third Fifth-day and the last First-day in every month. The meeting in deliberation refers the subject for further attention at next meeting."

The following month "the request" received still further consideration. The succeeding month the subject was introduced and was not united with.

After an interval of two months we find a minute which states that the Valley Preparative again mentions "the request of our members in Charlestown to be indulged with a meeting;" but this time there is a slight alteration in the petition, the proposal now being, to hold the meeting every other First-day morning. The meeting, after weighing the subject, decided the first meeting should be held the 21st of Sixth month, 1812, and should continue to be held for six months. Extensions of three months and one month followed. The zeal of our Friends seemed to suffer no abatement because of the restraining power and we find them again presenting a request,--this time, to be indulged in meeting on both First and Fifth-days; which request, the Monthly Meeting records they "are most easy to grant for a period of seven months" which is then extended six months and again four months. At this time, a report from the Men's Meeting in favor of an established meeting for Charlestown members is defeated by non-approval in the women's branch of the Monthly Meeting, and it was decided "to continue the meetings at Charlestown, as heretofore, upon suffrance."

But our spiritual ancestors had wearied of suffrance, for two months later we find them again knocking at the door and supplicating for a permanent meeting. Finally the desired answer came and a minute from Radnor Monthly Meeting, embodying a report, signed by James Jones, Stephen Stevens, Leah Moore and Elizabeth Kimber, directs that the established meeting at Charlestown be held on First and Fifth-days of each week excepting the Fifth-days on which Valley Preparative and Radnor Monthly Meetings are held, and that the meeting be opened on the second First-day of the Eleventh month at the eleventh hour; "subject to the approval of the Philadelphia Quarterly Meeting." This approval was given in due order and to quote from the

minutes of the Quarterly Meeting: "The proposal of establishing a meeting for worship in Charlestown township is concurred with and Friends there are left at liberty, accordingly, to hold the same; it being understood that the proposed meeting is to be a branch of the Valley Preparative Meeting and to be known by the name of Charlestown Meeting."

The struggle of three years and nine months for permission to have an established meeting for worship was thus ended and the first gathering under the new conditions was on the 12th day of Eleventh month, 1815.

One cannot resist indulging in many theories as to the cause of this delay. The reticence which characterizes the records quoted gives one no clue, nor do we find anything similar in the conditions of the Society at the present time to assist us in finding a solution.

The house was already supplied since in Second month 1st, 1815, Valley Preparative Meeting notes : "Our friend Enoch Walker informed this meeting that he intended to give about two acres of ground in Charlestown for a meeting place for the Society of Friends on which a schoolhouse is erected at present. The following Friends are appointed to hold a Deed of Trust for the same, to wit:--Thomas George, Joseph Conard, Jr., Cornelius Conard, Joseph Roberts and Daniel Conard. Also Israel Roberts and Thomas J. Walker are appointed to see that the said Deed is executed and recorded and take the same in charge."

A few years ago, in this neighborhood, there was found among some old family papers, one which was evidently the first draft of the intentions of Enoch Walker when he put them into writing for presentation to the Meeting. This paper I have been allowed to copy and no excuse is necessary for presenting it here, as follows: For the information of Philadelphia Quarterly, Radnor Monthly and the Valley Preparative Meetings, or any of them, as relate to the house occupied by Friends as a meeting house in Charlestown, Chester County.

It was built on lands of Enoch Walker in the year 1807, under the name of a school house, though pretty much to accommodate friends of Charlestown with a place of their own to hold religious meetings, whenever they thought proper to occupy it--the school also held therein with the house and land to be always under the direction of the Society of Friends. Therefore, feeling deeply interested for the garded Education of my children and to have a house convenient to hold religious meetings in, where we might be visited by friends in the love of the gospel or by the liberty of the Monthly Meeting, I drew up a subscription containing in the body thereof my intention as above mentioned whereby I thought the Society of Friends would have all power over said premises (but) admitting others who would be likely to send to school (to) subscribed and with much perseverance and difficulty obtained approved subscribers to the amount of One hundred and seven dollars and fifty cents and received thereon fifty-three dollars and fifty cents--nevertheless meeting with so little encouragement, I completed the building in a few weeks--the whole of the cost (excepting forty dollars' worth of scantling which one worthy friend, Richard Jacobs, gave) amounted to five hundred dollars and eighty-five cents, which deducting the amt.

received leave a balance due me of Four hundred and forty-seven dollars and thirty-five cents. There was only three persons who were not members contributed to the above said building having subscribed. They have for value offered them and other good causes, signed all their right, title, claim and interest in said house to me in order that friends might be satisfied. That difficulty being removed there remains nothing else preventing me to execute a good and sufficient Deed of Conveyance to friends for the aforesaid purposes.

Now this is to certify whom it may concern that I remain, as I have done for seven years, very free to convey to Radnor Monthly or Valley Preparative Meeting, a good and sufficient Deed of Conveyance for between one and a half or two acres of land whereon the aforesaid building stands with all the buildings and appurtenances thereunto belonging, the growing timber excepted and to be cut and removed only as it becomes on the decline; it being my wish and intention that none of the trees thereon should ever be cut away whilst they remain in a flourishing state unless it is to make room for buildings and a burying place.

Thus I am willing provided Radnor Monthly Meeting and Philadelphia Quarter grants a meeting at said place to be held twice a week excepting the weeks in which our Yearly, Quarterly, Monthly and Preparative Meetings are held. And anyone of said meetings takes charge of the school, it being my choice that the Yearly or Quarterly Meeting or an association of the members thereof should take charge of it and improve by buildings, gardens, etc., for the higher branches of learning that our young men above the age they are admitted at Westtown may have an opportunity to finish their education within the pale of our Society so as to qualify them to fill any useful station that the Society approves of.

On the above conditions either by receiving or not receiving the four hundred and forty-seven dollars and thirty-four cents with the interest thereon for seven years, amounting in the whole to six hundred and thirty-five dollars and twenty-three cents, I do hereby bind myself, my Heirs, executors, Administrators or assigns or any of them to perform this my unshaken intention as soon as there is established in the aforesaid Charlestown a meeting for the Society of Friends and a proper number of persons are appointed by either of the aforesaid meetings to receive the Deed in trust. As witness my hand and seal this the 30th day of the Ninth month, A. D. 1814.

ENOCH WALKER, who wishes if either of the aforesaid meetings approve of the above that it may be recorded as testimony in favor of the Society having conveyed to them the aforesaid land according to the above declaration. The plot of land thus intended to be conveyed is situated on a beautiful eminence near to two roads which cross each other, and would not be purchased from me for one thousand dollars, admitting there was no prospect of a meeting being stablished thereon, nor no use for a school. I have frequently been apply'd for the ground; but it has ever been my impression that it was an eligible situation for a meeting house as any I ever saw and do therefore show by practice my sentiment, that private interest should give way to public good. There is ground enough to answer the purposes of the meeting, burying place, etc., admitting friends should think proper to build another meeting house and there is also room enough on said

lot to have a large commodious dwelling house for a teacher sufficient to board and lodge one hundred boys and have a garden and yard to the same as it is expected there will not be less than two acres of land. When the Deed is wrote I wish all my views to be taken in that if the Yearly Meeting don't see proper to occupy the same for a school that the Quarterly Meeting of Philadelphia may. If it does not incline that an association of the members may and if that don't take place, that the Monthly Meeting may. If the Monthly Meeting will not that ye Preparative Meeting may and if the Preparative of the Valley Meeting will not take charge of said school, that the Friends of Charlestown may, and they are to be at liberty to promote and encourage a school in conformity to the recommendation of the Society; unless any of the other meetings should take it under charge, the lesser always to give way to the greater by having three months' notice and none but the greater meetings have it in their power to promote an Institution of the most public good.

One of the traditions of the neighborhood ascribed the gift of the stone steps at the front door to Louis Wemway, a noted German engineer, at one time resident here, who built the first great bridge across the Schuylkill at Philadelphia, the span of which, at the time of building, was the longest known.

In Ninth month, 1816, a Commission appointed by Valley Preparative Meeting, two months previous, to examine the condition of the house at Charlestown, report the need of a gallery and benches and suggest that the grave-yard be enclosed with a post and rail fence.

In 1818, Wm. Roberts, Daniel Conard, Enoch Walker and Jonathan Cleaver were appointed by Valley Preparative Meeting to superintend the building of six sheds and a stone wall on the northwest side of the grave-yard.

In this same year we find Radnor Monthly Meeting considering a proposition from Charlestown which suggested the establishing of a Monthly Meeting at Charlestown, to be composed of the Valley, Providence and Pikeland Preparative Meetings. It is recorded that this proposition "received weighty attention" at three successive meetings when "way not appearing clear to proceed," the subject was dismissed. Following this date for at least a quarter of a century, there seems to be but little of historical value in the minutes of either Radnor Monthly or Valley Preparative Meeting in regard to Charlestown Meeting.

Perhaps reference should be made to the only school of which we have knowledge, held in this room, which was that already mentioned as taught by Benjamin Moore. In connection with mention of this school it may not be out of place to give an incident related by my father, he having been one of Benjamin Moore's pupils. This story was of a visit to the school made by Sarah Walker, a daughter of Enoch Walker, and at the time a Westtown student home on a visit. Benjamin Moore asked her to read for the school. The classic of those days was the English Reader compiled by Lindley Murray. From that collection she chose Dr. Johnson's "Journey of a

Day" and delighted her auditors by the clearness, deliberation and dignity of her rendering of that "Lesson of Life."

William Folger, a relative of Lucretia Mott, was also a pupil. This was brought to mind by a recent re-reading of the "Life of Lucretia Mott," when chancing upon a paragraph which told of a branch of the family being interested in nail works on the banks of the French Creek. This was the enterprise which had brought William Folger's family here.

During the latter years of my father's life a stranger entered his office and accosted him with, "Art thou Elijah F. Pennypacker?" which was answered by "another question, "Art thou William Folger?" whereupon the friendship was re-established, reminiscences followed and the query came, "Dost thou remember Sarah Walker's visit and her reading to the school?" and then the two aged men in concert repeated the story of how "Obidah, the son of Abensina, left the caravanserai early in the morning and pursued his journey through the plains of Indostan" --an example of the strength of early impression.

In 1845, Second month 5th, Valley Preparative Meeting appoints Stephen Stephens and Charles Thomas to collect some money to assist Schuylkill Friends' to defray the expenses of building a schoolhouse.

It would seem that timidity has never been a characteristic of our meeting, which we find is now called Schuylkill, as evidenced by an interesting minute in the books of Radnor Monthly Meeting, dated First month 13th, 1848, which reads as follows: "The committee appointed by the monthly meeting to visit Schuylkill Preparative Meeting on conferring together were united in judgment that an advantage would arise from men and women holding their preparative meetings separate and apart from each other, and we would encourage them to weigh the subject and adopt our suggestion, believing it would be more in accordance with the order and practice of society." Signed by Abner Lewis, Vanlen Eachus, Lydia Davis, Ruth Thomas. The query arises, was this the first meeting to suggest joint sessions? One year later an exercise was spread before the meeting that the Valley and Schuylkill preparative meetings be reunited and some months later we find that way did not open to adopt any change.

In 1854 Charles Adamson and Joseph Walker are appointed to have charge of the deed of conveyance and to consult Moses Robinson thereof.

Because of difficulty in gaining access to records at a time when there was leisure to devote to them it has been impossible to examine all up to the present time and preference has been given to the earlier rather than to the later records. No trace was discovered of the minutes of Schuylkill Preparative Meeting which would, perhaps most of all, place us in intimate communication with the activities within the meeting of our parents and grandparents.

The closing of the earthly pilgrimages of many and the scattering of families have greatly depleted our numbers, and probably no one present remembers a time when an attendance of

twenty persons at a First-day morning meeting was not considered a very encouraging number. In the days of the ministry of Lucretia Mott, Dr. George Truman and William Dorsey, circular meetings held in this house were so largely attended that it was necessary to lower the partition, both rooms being filled. These meetings were held, however, on First-day afternoon, and the attendance did not at all represent our membership, being drawn from Phoenixville and the surrounding country and represented all sects. In the "Life of Lucretia Mott," to which allusion has already been made, there was reference to some Friends' meetings which prohibited the holding of anti-slavery meetings within their walls. No such feeling existed here. Though the neighborhood could not be considered anti-slavery in its attitude, there were members of this meeting who were pronounced advocates of that cause, and some old-fashioned reflectors which have long been a part of the rubbish of the adjacent schoolroom, were purchased to be used in intensifying the illuminating powers of the oil-lamps and tallow candles on the occasion of evening anti-slavery lectures held in this room.

James Wood, a Philadelphia merchant, who succeeded Enoch Walker as owner of Moore Hall, and who made it his summer home, felt so strongly on the subject of race prejudice that he requested his body should be buried in our modest ground, rather than in the family enclosure at Laurel Hill, where regulations prohibited any dusky brother from resting within its limits. His grave here is a mute witness of the sincerity of his convictions. To James Wood we are also indebted for added associations, for with him came to worship here the Quaker poet beloved by all, John G. Whittier. When the latter, as a young man, was editor of the Pennsylvania Freeman in Philadelphia, Whittier found a home there and an intimacy was established between these two men which found expression in quiet visits to Moore Hall.

"And so" they found "it well to come
For deeper rest to this still room."

I have frequently heard allusions by those who remembered, to the impression made by the quiet dignity, stately grace and dark flashing eyes of the poet.

Of the schools held in the adjoining room, probably the first was that under the care of Elijah F. Pennypacker.

It would be interesting to follow the careers of many of the students who worked and played in that building. They have sought and found many places, have followed the highways of the world, and one of them sat at the council table of the nation--Wayne MacVeagh, he being one who was removed from school when his father became alarmed at the anti-slavery and reformatory bias given by his preceptor.

I remember a story told by one who played and who, on a certain Fifth-day, was not considered worthy to attend the mid-week meeting with the school as was customary. Instead he was left alone with his books and presumably with study. His meditations, however, were with his classmates, on this side of the partition. Finally his desire to see them became so strong that he

mounted the desk, whose length extended along the partition on the other side, and stretching up with infinite care, his fingers resting on the upper edge, where the lower fold met the upper one, he managed, through the crack to gain a view of the devout assemblage. Finally his absorption overcame his prudence and his weight rested upon the edge, it dropped and the culprit, with uplifted hands, protruding eyes and open mouth was disclosed to the gaze of the startled beholders.

Later, as a teacher, came Graceanna Lewis, whose scientific work afterwards attracted the attention of Prof. Huxley. It was in one of her classes in the next room that she so aroused the interest of a little girl in the study of physiology that it culminated a few years afterward in the study of medicine and her pupil was the second woman in the United States to receive the diploma of Doctor of Medicine.

Here the records are left for other historians to complete. Should our members so decrease as to reach extinction the principles for which our Society stands will remain:

"The mystery, dimly understood,
That love of God is love of good,
That to be saved is only this,--
Salvation from our selfishness,
That Book and Church and Day are given,
For man, not God--for earth, not Heaven."

